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Carol Brightman

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CAROL BRIGHTMAN

The Word, The Image, And *The Silence*

In contemporary criticism, particularly when it “pans,” it becomes increasingly obvious that the words of seeming description just don’t stick—at least not to what happens on the screen. Instead, it is the paper wars which are supported, the sectarian skirmishes of critics whose periodic schedules encourage newsy jurisdiction at the price of understanding. Film criticism has, in effect, largely become an awkward series of maneuvers between camps, by which critics can distinguish themselves not according to their singular perceptions, but simply *from* each other. That they fail even in that is obvious from the surprising coincidence of fault-finding phrases which, in the hands of many serious critics, only exceeds Crowther’s anxious preoccupation with “negativism” by a degree of literacy, or by a matter of taste. It would appear, from a cursory reading of such regular critics as Kauffman, Simon, and then Sarris, that they are often intent upon resisting those cinematic impressions which *cannot* be subsumed beneath a single word or phrase which judges, while it presumes to describe. Yet it is just these impressions of which the best of modern cinema is made.

Truffaut, Godard, Antonioni, and Bergman in *The Silence* may be analyzed according to a literary principle of dislocation, for example; but to superimpose on that a suspicion of formlessness which slips easily into charges of deliberate obscurantism, or irreverence for the “fullness of life” (a novelistic ideal we’ve clung to long after the fragmentations of modern life have undermined it), is a tricky pastime of critics who have inherited movies largely by default, in place of the new novels which have abandoned them. Like much of recent European literature these films defeat the pundit; their meanings (or apparent lack thereof) cannot be paraphrased, much less

used as sticks to beat or tame the very animals from which they are wrenched. Whenever meaning is attributed to man or deed within these films, it characteristically presents itself as simply a further phenomenological routine: we take it or leave it depending on whether or not it is displaced by another, or left hanging. But first we note its presence on its own peculiar terms. Recognition without judgment, unfortunately, has always been rare in the West; only in our time we have forgotten that it is the essential distinction which would make the critic’s imperative a worthwhile one.

“Ingmar Bergman’s *The Silence*,” John Simon submits, “is, I am sorry to say, a disappointing film” (*New Leader*, Feb. 17). I maintain it is not, but my first concern here is to question the *technique* of Simon’s judgment. I choose his review because it so effectively spans the gap between the news hacks, bedeviled with messages of promise, and those critics who know better than to freight movies with an irrelevant duty to console—but who nevertheless have not eluded that vocabulary which scales their plus and minus value according to vague normative assumptions of what “says” something, and what does not. Essentially there is no difference between the affirmative mania, bored in the face of gratuitous invention, and the splenetic disaffection of critics such as Simon who can’t put up with [Godard’s] “attitudinizing and maundering about the human crisis” (*NL*, Sept. 30, 1963) at the expense—of *what*? Of succinct statement presumably, direct narration, content unencumbered by stylistic options. It is hard to guess the alternative because it forces us to stop talking about modern films and begin talking about drama perhaps, or nineteenth-century novels—some art where, alas, the blind of the camera is absent.

We do know, however, what happens to the critic when a modern film is found "maundering"; so will his attention. "Emptiness, boredom and lack of transcendental values" will, by virtue of a peculiarly anxious empathizing, guarantee the emptiness, boredom, and lack of a transcendental response from the spectator. As if these emotions projected in the film are merely projections of living tensions, the spectator suffers accordingly, mistaking art for life. He is accustomed to the abreactions of their more positive or tragic counterparts. These latter emotions, he finds, do *not* tend to drag, without happy end or any end at all; conventionally, they respond to objective stimuli as well as ultimately transform the given world in their own images. The emotions born of frustration, on the other hand, endure for the very reason that the given environment cannot be assimilated or overwhelmed; it remains in the rough: the fractious residue of a world cut off from human use which survives to remind its inhabitants of their uselessness. A character in this case doesn't interact; he does not develop in time—but in space. His being expands, gesture by gesture, until by the end he has revealed himself within the configuration of

objects (including the human) into which he is thrown. The emotional content of his existence arises from a crisis without solution. But our critic won't have one without the other; hence he is doubly confused. He wants an out, an alternative to the apparent submission, a proper measure of experience which might attribute motive to that existence, giving it the causal necessity he likes to find in life.

"Like Antonioni, Bergman chose to make a trilogy about the emptiness, boredom and lack of transcendental values in life; like Antonioni's, Bergman's third installment stringently divests itself of narrative content and shifts the burden of communication from incident to implication, from statement to symbol." The comparison with Antonioni is apt, but the analysis is wrong.

Let me first suggest that if Simon insists upon bracketing this formidable assembly beneath such worn and depreciable labels, better he simply say these "trilogies" (if the term itself is anything more than a critical expediency) are about lives which *happen* to be empty, bored, and bereft of transcendental values. There is a difference, and not a negligible one for a face-to-face encounter with



*The basic
constellation
in
THE SILENCE*

these films. What preserves them all from being thematic tracts in the first place (with the partial exception of *Through a Glass Darkly*) is the fact that character is applied to idea, not idea to character. (When the latter occurs, Simon may be right: "Bergman, whatever his greatness, does not have enough 'ideas' for a film of ideas." *NL*, May 27, 1963—on *Winter Light*.)

Simon seriously errs when he automatically introduces an *evaluative* discrimination between the effectiveness of "communication" shifted from "incident" to "implication," from "statement" to "symbol." He assumes a gradual weakening—or dissolution—of expression in its passage from statement to symbol ("symbol" in a sense the Symbolists would have abjured). Just so, does Kauffman find *The Silence* "patently a symbolic work about alienation . . . its symbolism is its defect; it breaks down into a series of discernable metaphors" which he scrupulously itemizes; he then concludes imperturbably, "it almost seems to have been contrived as an exercise for that school that looks on *criticism* as cryptography" (*New Republic*, Feb. 22, 1964. Italics mine: curious that Kauffmann faults the critic not the film, which would seal his case.) The well is poisoned, no wonder it yields an unsavory draught.

Such semantic malpractice cannot be cured by a dictionary or thesaurus. Only a new look at the films themselves will suffice. Kauffmann's charming synopsis demonstrates how irrelevant the old, letter-bent eye can be to these films. "Two sisters are traveling through Europe. . . . Ester is unmarried, Anna is married and is accompanied by her eleven-year-old son. Ester suffers a violent attack of an unnamed but obviously grave illness. They must stay overnight in the capital of a fictitious country . . . in a *luxé* hotel . . ." It all happens, but something's wrong (and it's not the fact that this would seem to make even duller watching than it does reading). The missing factor upon which the whole power of the film depends is that *The Silence* makes

sense not according to what happens, but to *how* it happens. The plot synopsis is irrelevant because the film is not "about" a plot, but about certain emotions, about character. Events serve to provoke characters to certain quintessential routines through which we see their existences circumscribed.

Film like any art has a number of parts, none of which are expendable but any of which can be exploited to serve varying purposes. It is unfortunate, and not entirely coincidental, in a time when the director's function as technician is frequently exploited far more than his (or his screenwriter's) function as storyteller, that critics should tax that part of stylistic invention with the losses accrued by the part of direct narration. Hence Kauffman: "Bergman so easily creates such an atmosphere of import that, in fact, its excellence only emphasizes the vacuousness of the piece." The resulting exegeses are not only misleading but useless to a true reception of the film.

Consider Simon: "Like *Eclipse*, *The Silence* deals with non-communication." (Non-communication, like in vacuousness.) But what are the silences, punctured by natural sounds and only abortively by vague, erratic monosyllables in both films, if they are not forms of communication? Because these characters do not speak in paragraphs, are they not communicating? (This, I fear, is the plaint of the literary man.) A muttered "No-no," a blank or searching stare, is as much an act of communication in film as a mouthful of whys and wherefores. Bergman's "implication" may be as declarative as Wayne's whip, it only says something else. A mum female is not a trussed symbol of man's inability to communicate, but a mum female. It's the least we owe her, without holding her or her director to promises they never made. We might listen to our Vittis, Moreaus, and Thulins for what they do say, not for what they fail to say. *Eclipse*, finally, isn't "about non-communication," but a certain kind of communication; the same holds for *The Silence*. If what is communicated is



Anna and the waiter.

boredom, emptiness, etc., so be it, but let us not fall into a Panglossian trap and prate about an "inability to communicate": the happier emotions just aren't there; meanwhile, a great deal, including some acute intelligence concerning the nature of women, happens in their absence.

In his review of *Eclipse* (NL, Feb. 4, 1963), Simon called it a "luminous failure," a phrase which might better describe his own critical response to the film. After a brilliantly perceptive description of *Eclipse* as a "metaphor made up of many smaller metaphors," he nevertheless asks—and we must demand the same of him—"Why should so many superb details add up to an unsatisfactory film?" "Because," he replies, "we cannot care for people who will not even put up a fight against boredom, because we are not allowed to go inside characters, because no possible alternative to defeat is offered." But why can't we care? Won't our *amour propre* allow it? Or is it a commitment to that "fulness of life" properly delineated in novels? Are we free to care only when these characters become somehow hopeful? Is their acquiescence too strong a tonic for us, a sense of loss which poisons our attentiveness? It is our loss, of course, if that is the case. But despite Simon's oddly arbitrary conclusion, it would appear he cared very much, at least enough to notice a great deal more in the film than most.

It may well be that an obdurate impatience with such hopelessness begins with a critical

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confusion over the purpose of a film—a confusion which is more than semantic. There is no reason why film or any art should be freighted with a "burden of communication." People may frequently address each other for that purpose, but artists are rarely so singlemindedly inclined. In art such communication is a contingency of the essential production. A film is composed of parts of which "communication" is one, but one inextricably bound to the visual structure of the whole; and in the modern film moreover, one which is often incidental, as spectacle to a tragedy. It is the propagandist, however enlightened or enlightening, who will use his characters, incidents, and symbols primarily to communicate certain messages, rather than to objectify them. Imagine for a moment some natural mystery (a man's fate, perhaps, driven to term by an accident): suppose we were asked to choose between belief and comprehension; comparably, we can distinguish art from propaganda. In neither case are we fooled, but in the latter the sense is merely conveyed rather than created.

For critics suffering from an undue preoccupation with film as communication, style, or formal coherence, will frequently go unnoticed or misconstrued. "Like *Eclipse*, *The Silence* will have no truck with a middle. And there is no end either . . ." Unless one walks in after the beginning, such an observation is irresponsible. Again Simon barks up other trees. Very possibly for any film whatsoever, no matter how conventionally narrated, the beginning, end and middle must be first considered as just those points before which nothing happens, after which nothing happens, and then, everywhere in between. Even with a causal propulsion from one event to another, the movement of "plot" in cinema is uniquely a succession of images—not incidents; and the expressive content of an image or sequence, contributive to the total plot, is not necessarily proportionate to its apparent activity or relevance to the solution of plot. It is indeed extremely difficult when speaking of film to dissociate the function of incident itself

from the function of its component images (angle, lighting, sound properties, etc., which determine their net effect). Simon manages so easily because he is simply looking for—and so, naturally misses—action, the action which leads the spectator from one time and place and statement, to another.

First in the consequent “threefold inadequacy” Simon finds in *The Silence*, is “not enough forward thrust, not enough momentum to unite the specific points, the complementary but discrete images.” Presumably he will take his images only if they are ornamental to action which moves neatly if thrustingly forward. It is undoubtedly a problem of the imagist films of today (to risk another expedient label) that we must respond *specifically* to the cinematic environment: that our attention must be delicately tuned to the tensions in visual as well as sound montage, and finally that the beginnings and ends of these contrapuntal sequences be initially observed in montage as well as in *mise en scène*, rather than in the origin and solution of narrative action. Such attention is nothing new, and we know too well how blindly it can be pressed into the service of the most egregious examples of New American Cinema. But *The Silence* is no such film: Like many an imagist film it is static in that there is no significant development of plot.* Action is synchronous; the dramatic whole emerges in the overall pattern of juxtaposition. Should the film begin anywhere else but in the clammy heat of the train compartment, where again it ends, the whole would collapse. We would lose the thematic

*Godard is the exception here, since images in his hands are themselves set in motion. Through jump-cuts, swift panning, and the “snapshot” cutting used in *Le Petit Soldat*, action is not accreted through successive visual impressions, but is propelled on a linear plane, frame by frame; like the full life of the Absurd which it reflects, it affords no regret, no flashback nostalgia for the consequences of actions already spent in a present severed from successive moments of consciousness; its *happening* is all, and is complete.

unity which seals the three lives in an inescapable vise at each end: from their emergence out of a mutually debilitating past into a foreign city, to the return of the two back to the same past, without future, by the same route, while the third surrenders to an actual death, locked in the middling labyrinth of the strange hotel. Importantly, we would lose Bergman’s favored myth of the journey which, although it proves elliptical in *The Silence*, in many of his earlier films serves to draw character along an arduous path of discovery and development, for better or worse.

Simon submits as the second aspect of the “threefold inadequacy”: “There is not enough human content; there are hints of the past . . . but the characters do not have enough space in which to develop, precisely because what space there is must remain empty to convey the message.” We are reminded of his impatience with *Eclipse* for not allowing us “to go inside the characters.” Just why he should demand further entrance (if indeed any “inside” exists) is unclear, but it’s clear enough that Simon is not alone among critics dissatisfied with appearances unbuttressed by explicit motivation. The point of *The Silence* and *Eclipse* is that the emptiness, the preoccupation with objects, is the “human content” of each film. When the objects take over (in *Eclipse*) they displace a quality of human content, not “human content” itself. Man must remain responsible, even for his displacement. Again, it is the least we owe him.

Perhaps if critics ceased snapping at messages (“Why does this well-bred, intelligent boy pee in the corridor of this posh hotel? Obviously, that means *something*.”—Kauffmann), this deductive trap could be avoided.* Simon has considered only that space where he

*“The dwarfs are just symbols. . . . The tank in the street is a symbol. . . . The few words in the foreign language are a symbol. Even the wild sex is a symbol.” (Sarris, *Village Voice*, Feb 20, 1964). So goes the ridiculous extreme of this kind of criticism—a kind of madness, assuredly, where either everything’s a symbol, or nothing is.

finds his "message," and obviously, finding it less than earthshaking he wants more, more filler material. The ladies are too disturbed, the boy a sphinx without a riddle; there must be some explanation! Clearly *The Silence* does not offer us full-blown case studies, or even spare ones. We are confronted with the effects of disturbance, of the supine obeisance of the boy, not the causes; the symptoms, not the disease. But why demand more?

We might introduce a very respectable argument here for the timely realism of Bergman's assemblage, but this isn't the point. Simon resembles the art critic who looks at a Gris and complains there is no substance there, only surfaces. By now we should know that the "insides" of things, as well as minds, can only be viably described from the outsides. There are many ways to accomplish this. A psychoanalytic inter-penetration of behavioral symbols is only a more frantic manipulation of surfaces, and in film particularly this pre-occupation tends to be least interesting (e.g., *David and Lisa*, along with the plurality of Hollywood's psychodynamic whodunits). Bergman in fact deserves credit here for controlling his impulse to explain, an impulse which has burdened many of his films with themes they strain overmuch to deliver. No doubt it is this very reserve which led Truffaut to allude to *The Silence* as his best film—a reserve which in effect leads Bergman to engage in the same dislocation of action from its customary emotional, judicative responses which Truffaut himself used so effectively in *Shoot the Piano Player*.

Only when Ester's breakdown seems imminent and we are shocked by our incomprehension of her disease ("symbol" says lung cancer) does she exclaim: "We try out many attitudes; but the forces are too strong, the dark forces." And these lines do provide a clue, in depth, of the existential imperatives Ester has wagered without profit. They underline the psychical evidence of her torment without diminishing it by abstraction. She exclaims, she does not explain, and it comes as revelation:

Ester *would* say that on her deathbed. Unlike the tag line, "God is love, love in all its forms," in *Through a Glass Darkly*, Ester's recognition provides us with only a skeleton key to her schizophrenia, a schizophrenia which is, fundamentally, as ordinary as it is alarming. Her monologue (for the sympathetic old waiter can't understand a word) is simply a tentative summation, which happens to be final, under which her previous misadventures might be reckoned. As apologia it is equally vulnerable to reason and passing sensation, like all last-ditch acts of personal vengeance. We find ourselves still observing her phenomenologically, with no real explanation of the origin of her breakdown, no real expectation of a solution, but waiting nevertheless for the act of recognition which will seal her fate. That is the tension which ultimately is unrelieved in a dramatic sense; it is merely superceded when our attention is shifted to the boy troubling over the foreign words she has passed on to him.

As it happens Ester knows perhaps a little more about herself than we can, but not enough to convert herself conveniently to symbol. From the intellectual pride (a pride, as well, in the appurtenances of intellect) which we observe manifested so coolly before the typewriter, we can deduce a long history of such "attitudes" desperately assumed—but none the less authentic for that—to withstand the invasion of irrational forces which will fracture not only the attitudes but the human will-to-assume itself. The "forces"—the incestuous attraction for father, then sister, finally for self—achieve their proper magnitude as the shriek of flesh, once repressed, or exiled by the disjunctive demands of intellect, becomes intolerably mean and animalistic. The forces of the body, finally, its "secretions and excretions," prove too strong for the assumptions of the will.

Could this be the Message? And is the leap to faith to follow? Perhaps the words which Johan doggedly pursues on the retreating train do forge a link between Ester's last will and testament to the powers of comprehension and

the ongoing, pre-reflective life of the boy. "Spirit," he reads (in the dubbed version, although we are denied this last-minute tip in the subtitles). Simon concludes that this final act of communication suggests "Art is universal, and so, potentially, is language." Such a leap does befit the customary reduction of Bergman's plots to Intellect v. Art, Reason v. Faith, etc. Even better, we could snare a happy synthesis here, since it is the intellectual's submission to faith in the endurance of language as source of communion among men which carries the day. (The fact that, as Simon observes, language shared by the sisters is used solely to poison each other further against themselves, and can only fall comfortably upon the uncomprehending ears of the old waiter, could merely add a note of heroic desperation to Ester's testament.)

If Ester's sudden volubility is also Bergman's, the screenwriter finally possessing the screen, then perhaps the mesmeric oscillations between Ester's unsure intellectualism and Anna's unsure voluptuosity (linked by Johan's dutiful passage from one to the other) have merely been enforced to set up reverberations in our mind ("implications"), which Bergman can manipulate, even fulfill, in the single verbal dialogue between the "attitudes" and the "dark forces."

Not bad. Silence could make sense after all: it's been communicated. The polar personae of the two women, locked in a baleful embrace, cancel each other out dramatically. The dilemma can only be resolved in the timely confession of the more articulate, rising from her heated couch to speak for a director who simply hung around with a camera until this moment, when he would finally say what just can't be said any other way.

So runs the risk of reading a movie. If this should satisfy we should not be surprised to catch ourselves a moment later echoing Sarris, for one, whose critical job is relieved by the "evidence of an irreversible decline" he finds so generously supported in the symbolic obviousness of *The Silence*. Or like Kauffmann and Simon (on *Winter Light*), how easy it will be

to wonder why Bergman has to make films when his messages are carried so economically in a few lines, in a few static sets. But it *doesn't* satisfy. For one reason, as Colin Young observes in his review of *The Fiancés*, because "Ester and Anna must finally say to each other what their conduct has said already to us. This is not dramatic redundancy—exposition in the eighth reel—unless you look at these films as being conventionally about action which grows continually in a straight line instead of proceeding in circles which never really close."

Words speak while images only appear, and words are our business (don't we all share them?) while images are thrust upon us in the pure state, from a source compounded of artifice and raw being, leagued in the elusive interests of the director's imagination. So we find ourselves surrendering to the faintest appeal of language which explains, at the expense of a visual language which simply presents. We find it hard to see the sudden burst of speech as just another phenomenalist event.

Even Anna explains (earlier): "You hate me because you hate yourself—and all I have!" Her revelation probes the surface of their enmity like a periscope. But nothing follows: Ester dismisses her with a tricky condescension still left to her. Nevertheless the words may linger. Our first clue—first among the many with which we would later challenge Bergman's cinematic integrity, concluding perhaps, with Kauffmann, that the fact "the film is a rebus, with clues to be hunted in it, indicates its limitations" (not our own, of course). But Anna's words do echo throughout the succeeding silence. Ultimately, the two women do mirror each other; the dichotomy can be resolved only if they fuse, intellect with animality. Until then (until another film) Anna will find Ester's eye in the mirror watching her feed on her reflection, and Ester will find Anna's sex eating at her own body in despair of ever claiming that sex; and each will hate what she lacks, and love, needing the loss to heal the open wound. There can be no fusion, just as there is no explanation in *The Silence* but merely image straining to achieve a coherence

through the dwindling resources of meaning which words provide. Anna catches a further symptom, not a solution. The silence in the film, as much as the grate of natural and unnatural sounds, perpetually threatens to swallow the human voice. Not unreasonably do these characters often halt mid-sentence, overwhelmed by their vulnerability.

It is hardly suprising that Simon should find his third inadequacy in the physicality of the film (although it should be noted that this physicality, which Sarris believes pitches *The Silence* into the nudie circuit, is as searing a display of wounded intellect—not sex—imaginable). “For a film which proceeds by metaphors and implications,” says Simon, “certain sensual details are too strong.” The question arises, Even if we could support this distinction between implication and incident, metaphor and statement, why single out “certain sensual details” as somehow “stronger” than what seems to be the nonsensual details of the rest of the film? This is a confession of taste, or of a proclivity to register the more obvious functions of sex on a higher frequency than other demonstrations of instinct, thought, or emotion. What really unsettles Simon is likely to be that Bergman has isolated sensual details from their customary contexts. Even when Anna takes the café waiter, sex is still somehow onanistic; more important, these details are reported naturalistically without any interest in causes or effect.*

But the real issue here is that Johan’s adventures in the hotel corridor, or Ester’s assault upon cigarette, bottle, and later, upon her translations (safe cinematic proof of the Female Intellectual), are no more nor less “implication” or “metaphor” than Ester or Anna indulging themselves (much to their dissatisfaction). To me, these indulgences are less

sensual. Anna moving through the streets, the bathroom, or just moving, is far more so. It is not the degree of exertion which animates these latter scenes; it is their resonance, their suggestiveness, cinematically enforced in close-ups which amplify the minutest gestures into actions of resounding significance. Walking back and forth in the room becomes the pacing of a trapped animal. Lighting a cigarette, getting a fix. Ester’s grimace, a spellbound shriek without issue. Anna putting on a dress, an act of self-immolation. The old man eating a frank to lure the boy, nothing less, or less ludicrous, than castration. Johan being frocked by the dwarfs, a defloration. True passion resides in the charged gesture, not the overt act.

Not the least curious aspect of these close-ups is the fact that instead of creating a sense of intimacy with the characters, they effectually alienate them from us. We are continually rearing back from the massive circumstances of their narrow lives. Faces, fingers, hair, appear too close—they get *in the way*. Ester’s naked face imprisons her, but it is all there is. The only difference between these three faces filling the screen and the painted masks of earlier films whereby Bergman obscures the human countenance from simple view, is that these faces mask themselves, without artifice. Sven Nykvist’s camera imprisons them by liberating them from any background. Just so, the spare details of environment themselves encroach. Rather than provide the objects by which a man passes out of himself into a concrete world, these corridors, damask curtains, featherbeds appear as obstacles, like the glass windows through which an infrequent view of the world outside is gained—sealing the inhabitants away from any real encounter with that world. Like the earliest of Bergman’s films, *The Silence* is an *huis clos* but not on principle, simply because if one looks so close, it appears that way. Stripped to its inessentials, the human condition itself is claustrophobic.

Every visual incident amplifies the frustration of instinct caught at cross-purposes with

*Kaufman is led by the details to quibble, “Foe of censorship as I presume to be, I have not yet seen explicit sexual details in any film that were necessary to it. Whatever was cut out of *The Silence* has not hurt it” (an interesting admission coming from one of our more venerated weekly reviewers).



Anna—from Ester's viewpoint.

reality, until by the end, instinct appears resoundingly solipsistic. Reality remains a tank, lumbering prehistoric monster, phallus erect but extinct like the spine of a dead horseshoe crab. Escape appears for the boy as an interminable chase through the labyrinthine corridors: for his mother, it is the bought relief of the café and theater, reached through a street pinched by men and machines. For Ester everything she finds herself doing is a futile escape.

Johan is the sphinx; his blank face compels interpretation, but it repels every attempt to read. When the old waiter attempts to "talk" to Johan (after the misfire of his sudden, frightful embrace) he fumbles for a worn photo of himself taken at the same age standing behind the open coffin of his father. The boy responds with interest; with less interest he later slips it beneath the carpet, unseen. Brief displays of affection are native to his youth; an over-all impression of cool reticence is more native to his character. Johan is involved in a crisis without solution; he may be the product of it, but he promises no salvation; in effect he is uninformed enough to be the product of other worlds the sisters have forgotten or never known. His remains the one existence which bridges the shrill edge of *The Silence* with the world of possibility beyond, but he has not yet stepped beyond. So far, he too only perceives the world through glass. And when he does his attention is swiftly marshalled, as by the trainload of tanks which jerk his round eyes back and forth, uncomprehendingly (while telling us clearly enough that the town we

are entering is sealed off from the rest of the world—and from its own freedom—by military rule). The sun which Johan watches rising over the mountains, a white heat resembling Antonioni's ultramodern "eclipse," is unnatural. All of the pastimes open to Johan are unnatural; only his curiosity is not. When he looks out at us, it is as if he sees as far as the flat screen which delimits him, no further. His eyes never really focus. He has the terrifying innocence which comes once in a lifetime from knowing the worst without understanding either the worst or the best life may offer. Should he never mature to understand, he might be one of the bemused Extremators of the coming generation. Like the depthless Anna who stares at mirrors, Johan stares and finds things staring back at him, all equally detached from any knowledge he might have of their use. All three are hemmed in by a web of anxiety spun from the unconscious recesses of their frustration, which forbids natural engagement.

Bergman has transformed his three favorite themes into a new film, quite superior to his others. Notably, the Big Questions do not function in *The Silence* as excuses for the big answers. There is indeed no exit in life's game, but hell is hardly rendered more bearable in togetherness. Women do scrape the bottom of human experience, but for that very reason theirs is the more pitiful lot. (Unlike the women in *Brink of Life*, Ester and Anna are not awaiting men. In fact, the absence of men—except for the dumb and solely functional waiters—in *The Silence* is a curious thing; Ester tries hard to assume the masculine principle, but cracks embarrassingly.) Lastly, man's quest for knowledge is, in truth, a bitter one, so much so that the twin horns of reason and impulse which he is condemned to ride do eventually impale him. Life itself is a dying-in; any other form of protest would bore these three travelers who at least know how to make more out of their "lack of transcendental values" in less time and space than a host of busier characters marked for deliverance.